

Coin categories failing to make collectors' grade

By Roger Boye

Scores of collectors are lambasting a recent decision by the American Numismatic Association to revamp widely used standards for grading rare coins.

Among other things, the ANA Board of Governors voted earlier this summer to recognize 11 condition categories for uncirculated coins, rather than just the 5 classifications that ANA governors had sanctioned in 1980. Many pros insist the change—intended to make coin grading more precise—will harm the hobby instead.

"The ANA has unwittingly introduced divisiveness, uncertainty and now absurdity into the coin-grading issue," said hobbyist R.J. Kukla of Park Ridge in a letter published in *Coin World*. He asserted that the ANA is "... alienating its collector membership and turning what once was a great hobby into a crass commercial enterprise."

Grading categories are important because market prices are based on the grade—or condition classification—earned by a coin. A difference of just one or two grades can mean a huge price fluctuation.

For example, an uncirculated silver dollar dated 1894 can be worth from \$900 to \$10,000 or more, depending on such subtle factors as the amount of luster or the number of tiny abrasions called "bag marks." Likewise, the retail value of an uncirculated 1914-D cent can range from \$900 to at least \$2,500, depending on its grade.

The ANA critics contend that coin grading is largely an art—rather than a science—and that experienced hobbyists can disagree honestly when evaluating coins, especially uncirculated rarities. The use of 11 categories for "mint state" [uncirculated] coins implies great grading precision when no such precision exists, they say.

Even the ANA's national president, Florence M. Schook of Livonia, Mich., admitted that she has mixed feelings about expanding the number of grade classifications.

"As a collector, I thought we should have added just one more category [for uncirculated coins]," she said on July 27. "But the coin dealers wanted the 11 grades."

Other ANA governors—several of whom are dealers—say the association simply is adjusting its official grading standards to conform with the system already used informally throughout much of the rare-coin business.